

# What you need to know about Home Heating Oil Tanks

## Overview

Home Heating Oil Tanks are used to store oil for on-premises consumption. They may be installed above ground or buried underground. Today, many homes have switched from oil to natural gas or electricity for heating. When this happens, the homeowner may not know what to do with the tank and any unused oil. A possible concern with home heating oil tanks and piping is that they may leak oil into the environment. Also, if underground tanks are not properly abandoned, they may eventually rust through, resulting in a potential cave-in and collapse. The Goal of this document is to provide useful information to the homeowner on home heating oil tank issues.

## Does DHEC regulate home heating oil tanks?

No. DHEC does not regulate home heating oil tanks. Because the tanks are not regulated, you do not have to report a tank just because one is found. However DHEC is concerned about releases of oil and other contaminants to the environment. Therefore, tank owners are requested to help prevent or minimize the chance that tank contents will be released into the environment.

## How do I know if there is a tank on my property?

Home heating oil tanks are often buried in the ground outside the home within 10 to 25 feet of the house. A tank may also be placed above ground on saddles or supports near the home. Underground tanks usually have one or two pipes that come to the surface. The pipes may run along the side of the house or be found near ground level in a flowerbed, around trees, or in shrubs near the foundation of a house. A pipe may also be in the grass or near an entrance to a crawl space under a house. You may find a pipe by literally tripping over it. In other cases, a metal detector may be necessary to find the fill pipe.

## What if a tank is found on a property I am thinking of buying?

If you are buying a home, ask the current owner if they are aware of a heating oil tank on the property. An experienced home inspector may find a tank that the current owner did not know was there.

If a tank is found on the property, consider working with the current owner to have the tank inspected, removed, or properly abandoned in place. You could hire a contractor or environmental consultant to do this work.

## What does DHEC recommend for a tank that is currently being used?

Consider replacing the tank if you suspect that it is more than 20 years old. Modern systems decrease the likelihood of a spill because of new protections such as double walled tanks and piping. If you notice that you are using more fuel oil than normal, have the tank tested to make sure it's not leaking. Companies that can test tanks and lines are listed in the Yellow Pages of the phone book under "Tank Cleaning," "Tank Installation and Removal," or "Environmental."

### **What does DHEC recommend for a tank that is no longer being used?**

Have all fluids removed from the tank, including any oil or water that has accumulated.

Companies that can pump out tank contents and properly dispose of them are listed under “Oil-Fuels” in the Yellow Pages.

Small amounts of oil can be disposed of at local used-oil collection sites, such as recycling convenience centers. Larger amounts of oil will require a company that will be able to pick the oil up from your home. If you need more assistance with the disposal of oil, you can call DHEC’s Recycling Office at 1-800-768-7348.

The tank can be removed from the ground and hauled off by a tank removal service. Consider having the soil under the tank tested if you notice staining, or detect the presence of oil. If drinking water in your area comes from private wells, you may also want to have groundwater tested. If the tank is going to be left in place, it should be cleaned out and filled with a substance such as sand, concrete, or inert foam.

### **What if I find a leak?**

If you find a leak, please call DHEC at 1-888-481-0125, or 803-896-4000. Also, you can contact an environmental professional who has experience responding to fuel spills. Any fluids remaining in the tank should be pumped out to prevent further spillage. If the tank is being removed, grossly contaminated soil should be removed too, to limit the movement of oil to groundwater. This is especially important if there are any drinking water wells nearby.

### **How can I tell if there has been a leak?**

- Dead or distressed vegetation around the fill pipe
- Stained soil
- Fuel odors around the tank
- Fuel odors in a basement or crawl space

### **How can I tell if fluid remains in a tank**

Use a long stick, or an old broom handle and gently lower it to the bottom of the tank through the fill pipe. Once the stick reaches the bottom, remove it and note whether there is any moisture or petroleum product on the end (avoid contact with your skin; heating oil is similar to diesel fuel).

Even if the fluid remaining in the tank is mostly water, it will contain some petroleum compounds, and must be disposed of properly.

### **What if I do nothing with my tank?**

If a tank is left in place, it could eventually rust through and release its contents. Contamination of soil, groundwater, and even nearby surface water is possible. If there are drinking water wells in your area, they could become contaminated. Vapors may also accumulate in basements or crawl spaces. An empty tank may eventually rust through and collapse, causing a sinkhole.

To Report a Leak: Call DHEC’s Emergency Response hotline at 1-888-481-0125

For help finding an Oil Disposal contractor: Call DHEC’s Recycling Office at 1-800-768-7348